



A Program of the Lamoille Family Center

# A Guide to Having Conversations with Youth about Substance Use and Mental Health



Compiled with Involvement from  
Lamoille Valley Youth, Educators, and  
Health Care Professionals

# Acknowledgements

This guide is intended for Lamoille Valley educators and those who work with youth to provide a common language across sectors.

This guide is meant to be used in conjunction with your organization's policies and procedures. If anything in this guide conflicts with those, please defer to your organization's policies.

While we use Lamoille County Data for state/region comparisons we recommend that you look up your school district data.



[healthvermont.gov/stats/population-health-surveys-data/youth-risk-behavior-survey-yrbs](https://healthvermont.gov/stats/population-health-surveys-data/youth-risk-behavior-survey-yrbs)

Healthy Lamoille Valley wishes to thank and acknowledge Brian Duda, Youth Coordinator from October 2020-June 2024, for his efforts to make resources accessible to those working with youth throughout the Lamoille Valley. Brian has changed the landscape of our coalition work with Lamoille Valley youth. This guide is an example of his work.

This guide is funded through the Vermont Department of Health, Division of Substance Use Programs' Youth Vape Prevention grant.



*Healthy Lamoille Valley is a coalition of individuals and community organizations working collaboratively to prevent and reduce youth substance misuse and encourage youth to make substance free healthy choices.*

HLV website



Join Us and Work to Prevent and Reduce  
Youth Substance Misuse in Our Community!  
We want your involvement and voice!

[www.healthylamoillevalley.org](http://www.healthylamoillevalley.org) | [www.lamoillefamilycenter.org](http://www.lamoillefamilycenter.org)

Facebook: Healthy Lamoille Valley | Instagram: @healthylamoillevalley

LFC website



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# Setting the Stage for Conversations

Before having any potentially difficult conversations with youth, it is important that you have established rapport and trust with them. Below are some quotes from local students about how educators and other adults in their life can show youth they matter and are cared for:

“ Ask us about our day and actively listen ”

“ Show us that you are paying attention ”

“ Make a habit of commenting on the positives ”



“ Provide support and check in. Pick up on warning signs and share resources with us ”

“ If we're missing from a class or event, check in with us after to make sure we're ok. Show you care, show that it matters when we show up ”





# Effective Conversation: Tips & Tools

## Tips for Effective Conversations

- Have frequent, small conversations
- Show positive regard and genuine interest
- Be yourself, be honest, and share your feelings
- Show you care and respect youth autonomy to make their own choices. Acknowledge them as the expert in their own life
- Start with active listening (engaging verbally and nonverbally) then use OARS (see page 3)
- Think about your own body language - avoid standing over a student or too close - have an open comfortable posture
- Remember that each student is different and adjust your approach as needed to make each student feel comfortable and respected
- Build trust by doing what you say you will and offer support when needed
- If you do not have trust with the student, identify a team member who does to sit in on the conversation or take the lead

## Time & Place

### Where & When:

- Be prepared for natural, unplanned opportunities to dive into deeper discussion
- Have conversations when both you and the student are engaged and focused
- Avoid conversations during moments of crisis or when emotions are high
- on walks
- in hallways (quietly)
- during office hours
- at lunch
- before or after school
- homebase or advisory
- down time in class
- occasionally during a class (keep it general)



# Effective Conversation: Tips & Tools

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## OARS

A conversation framework to help elicit change

### Open-Ended Questions

Draw out their experiences,  
start with words such as:

"How..." "What..."

"Tell me about..." "Describe..."

*"What have you been doing  
to take care of yourself?"*

*"What matters most to you  
in life? Why?"*

### Affirmations

Supportive, genuine reinforcements of a  
person's

➤ Character ➤ Effort ➤ Skills

➤ Values ➤ Strengths

*"This is hard work you're  
doing"*

*"You are a very  
resourceful person"*

### Reflections

Statements that offer your interpretation of  
what someone is saying

- Used to express empathy, validate and show you are present and paying attention

*"I hear..."*

*"It sounds like..."*

### Summaries

Longer reflective statements that highlight  
important parts of the conversation

- Can be used to keep conversations focused and productive

*"Let me see if I got  
this right..."*



# Vaping and Other Substances

## Overview and Data

### Reasons Some Youth Vape and Use Substances

- Flavors and attractive youth-friendly products
- Social norms and social pressure among peers and friend groups
- To build social connections when they're not sure how to engage.
- Lack of positive coping skills - using substances to self-medicate or cope with stress, anxiety, depression, trauma, and other issues
- Youth and their peers and friends have favorable attitudes and low perception of harm toward substances
- Nicotine and other substances can be very addictive, especially for youth

#### OTHER RISK FACTORS:

- Targeted marketing toward youth and other populations (LGBTQ+, BIPOC, lower socioeconomic)
- Availability - online, retail, and access from family members and friends
- Parents and family approving of and normalizing youth substance use
- Not having a close, trusted adult other than a parent
- Lack of connection to their community
- Low sense of belonging at school, struggling academically

### 2021 VT High School Current Rates (past 30 day use)\*

LC = Lamoille County



Vape

VT-16% LC- 18%



Cannabis

VT-20% LC-25%



Alcohol

VT-25% LC-29%

**Teenagers in Vermont are 76% more likely to have used drugs in the last month than the average American teen.**



# Vaping and Other Substances

## Knowing and Sharing the Facts

### Vaping



Most teens do NOT vape



- Teens who vape report having higher stress and anxiety than those who don't



- Vape aerosol contains heavy metals, high amounts of the addictive chemical nicotine, and many other harmful chemicals



- Short-term effects include coughing, decreased breathing, and athletic ability

### Alcohol



Most teens do NOT drink alcohol



- Drinking can lead to poor decision-making especially around risky behaviors



- Drinking alcohol when you're young can negatively impact brain development and cause damage to the liver and heart



- People who begin drinking before the age of 15 are 4 times more likely to develop an alcohol use disorder than those who wait until they're 21

### Cannabis



Most teens do NOT use cannabis



- Cannabis use in teens has been linked to depression and anxiety



- Cannabis dulls attention, memory, and learning skills



- Those who begin using cannabis before age 18 are 4-7 times more likely than adults to develop a substance use disorder



# Vaping and Other Substances

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## Approaching the Subject



### For Youth 12 and Older

1. First, explore what information they know or think they know about substances
2. Have them think critically about those substances (Is what I've heard really true? What do I actually know? How can I learn more?)
3. Acknowledge peer pressure, explore how they might respond to situation where they might be offered substances
4. Communicate to students it's okay to say no
5. Help them create an exit strategy

### For Children Younger than 12

Conversations are best focused on:

- Topics of health and safety (e.g. only taking medicine given by a parent/caregiver or doctor)
- Healthy boundaries
- Being in charge of your body
- Seeking help
- Asking and answering questions



### A Note on Role Modeling

Kids and teens pick up on a lot from the adults in their life.

Try to be conscious of the language you use or the stories you tell in front of students so as not to unintentionally send the wrong message.



# Vaping and Other Substances

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## Framing Conversations

In talking about substance use, the framing that works most effectively is a focus on their future or about the risks of addiction



*"You respect yourself and want to make decisions that are best for you."*



*"Participating in [sports, music, hobbies or other activities, etc.] can help you build friendships, stay in shape, get into college, and have fun."*



*"Using drugs and alcohol changes parts of your brain that impact how you think and act. The more you use them, the harder it can be to stop even if you want to."*



*"What impact do you think substance use could have on your physical and mental health?"*



In addition, foster their sense of agency and autonomy:

*"The choice is entirely yours to make."*

*"What you choose to do is up to you."*





# Vaping and Other Substances

## Potential Signs of Use

Note - These signs alone are not necessarily indicative of substance use. However as a whole these behaviors should be addressed whether or not there is substance use. See page 9 if you suspect a youth might be using or they disclose use.

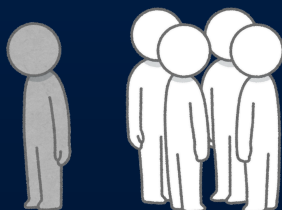
### Signs of Vaping

- Fruity smells without an obvious source
- Moody and jittery behavior
- Hard time paying attention or focusing
- Coughing
- Frequent hand to mouth activity
- Leaving for periods of time such as frequent trips to the bathroom



### Signs of Any Substance Use

- Drop in attendance and performance at school
- Mood changes (e.g., flare-ups of temper, irritability, defensiveness)
- Memory lapses, poor concentration
- Bloodshot eyes, lack of coordination, or slurred speech
- Sudden change in friends, favorite hangouts, and hobbies
- Self-care avoidance





# Vaping and Other Substances

## Responding to Situations

### You Suspect They Might Be Using Substances

- Don't assume and accuse them of using, instead share behavioral changes:

*"Hey, I noticed you've been [insert behavior change here] in class... is there anything I can do to help make class more accessible?"*

*"I just wanted to see how you're feeling about things in and out of class, is there anything you need or want to talk about?"*

### If They Admit to Using Substances

- Affirm the courage it took for them to share with you
- Emphasize/encourage help seeking as a sign of strength

Share that you are concerned, and let them know about available support both in-school and elsewhere (e.g. Youth Resources).

Give a warm hand-off to a counselor/administrator.

*"I'm interested in your health and safety and would like to share what I heard..."*

Follow-up with a school counselor and/or administrator and follow your organization's procedures for these situations

Share resources, found at:

[HealthyLamoilleValley.org/YouthResources](https://HealthyLamoilleValley.org/YouthResources)





## Responding to Situations

### You overhear them talking about situations with substances (e.g. upcoming party)

- Have them think through the situation. Ask them questions like...  
*“Will there be adults home?”      “Is there a plan to get help?”*
- Acknowledge that a party could get out of hand
- Ask them reflective questions before and after the event
- Call anonymous tip line if you know the address
  - Tips may be submitted anonymously by texting keyword VTIPS to 274637 (CRIMES)
  - Tips may also be submitted online by using the form available at this link
  - For Emergencies and incidents that are in-progress, please call 911



### You hear them talking positively about substances or downplaying the harms

- Approach the conversation with empathy and seek to understand - don't dismiss their thoughts right away
- Have them critically think about their stance - ask them where they learned about that information and if they think the source is reputable
- Ask if you can share some information you learned with them
- Have them explore the Youth Resources webpage and do any research with a critical lens

Share resources, found at:

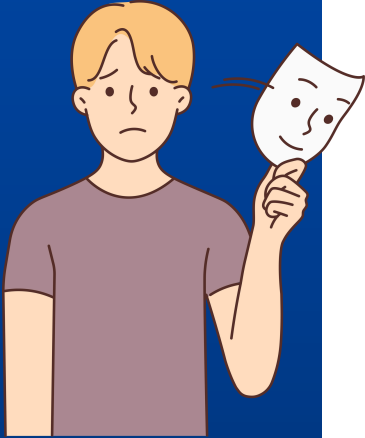
[HealthyLamoilleValley.org/YouthResources](https://HealthyLamoilleValley.org/YouthResources)





## Overview & Data

### Stigma and Masking Symptoms



Youth may tend to hide their symptoms, feel shame or embarrassment about what they're feeling, and may have internalized stigma. This defense strategy can make it more challenging to have conversations with youth and to know fully what a youth is experiencing. Furthermore, many youths struggle to voice and put to words what they are feeling.



### School-Based Risk & Protective Factors

#### Risk Factors

- Peer rejection
- Stressful or traumatic events
- School failure
- Low commitment to school and academics
- Aggression toward peers
- School violence

#### Protective Factors

- Presence of mentors and support for development of skills and interests
- Opportunities for engagement within school and community
- Positive norms
- Clear expectations for behavior
- Physical and psychological safety

### Mental Health Data

- Among adolescents aged 12-17 years
  - 42% had persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness
  - 29% experienced poor mental health
  - 22% seriously considered attempting suicide
  - 18% made a suicide plan
  - 10% attempted suicide
- Nearly 60% of female students and nearly 70% of LGBTQ+ students experienced persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness





## Signs & Symptoms

### Depression Signs



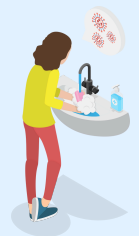
- An unusually sad mood
- Loss of enjoyment and interest in activities that used to be enjoyable
- Lack of energy and tiredness
- Feeling worthless or feeling guilty though not really at fault
- Thinking often about death or wishing to be dead
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Moving more slowly or sometimes becoming agitated and unable to settle
- Having sleeping difficulties or sometimes sleeping too much
- Loss of interest in food or sometimes eating too much
- Changes in eating habits that may lead to either loss of weight or weight gain
- Persistent irritability



### Anxiety Signs



- Recurring fears, worries about routine parts of everyday life
- Irritability
- Trouble concentrating
- Extreme self-consciousness or sensitivity to criticism
- Withdrawal from social activity
- Avoidance of difficult or new situations
- Chronic complaints about stomachaches or headaches
- Drop in grades or school refusal
- Repeated reassurance-seeking
- Sleep problems
- Substance use
- Restlessness or inability to relax
- Obsessive or compulsive behavior
- Phobic behavior
- Distress in social situations





## Approach

### **MEET THEM WHERE THEY ARE -**

Don't try to fix them or make them feel better. Be curious about what they are feeling and thinking. Ask questions and encourage them to correct you. Validate their emotions and experiences. Avoid asking why questions

*"Tell me more about that"*

*"How can I help?"*

### **BE PATIENT WITH THEM-**

Do not rush them. Identifying emotions and facing them can be tough and embarrassing for youth. Do not apply too much pressure on them as this could make them even more reluctant to open up. Ask one question at a time.

*Tip - Don't feel you have to fill the silence all the time.*

### **TAKE WHAT THEY SHARE SERIOUSLY-**

Know that what they are sharing is difficult. They want to be seen, heard, understood. Youth are often in a place of being told what to think, feel, etc.; this is not one of those times. Be curious, open, even if it seems trivial to you.

*"Thank you for sharing, I know that can be difficult."*

### **PROVIDE THEM OPTIONS/CHOICES-**

Be transparent about your intention. Let them know how you will be there for them, give them 2-3 options in choices to help guide the interactions, let them feel like they are choosing and a part of the process.

*"I wonder if you might...?"*

### **ACKNOWLEDGING DIFFICULT EMOTIONS-**

Everyone feels emotions. It is normal. Be careful to not say "I know how you feel" or overshare your experiences.

*"I'm curious if something could change right now that would make you feel better, what would that be?"*

Share resources, found at:

[HealthyLamoilleValley.org/YouthResources](https://HealthyLamoilleValley.org/YouthResources)







### ALGEE Action Plan (Mental Health First Aid)

#### Steps to supporting someone in a distressing situation

##### **A – APPROACH**

Assess for risk of suicide or harm. Try to find a suitable time or place to start the conversation with the person, keeping their privacy and confidentiality in mind. If the person does not want to confide in you, encourage them to talk to someone they trust.

##### **L – LISTEN NON-JUDGMENTALLY**

Many people experiencing a challenge or distress want to be heard first, so let the person share without interrupting them. Try to have empathy for their situation. You can get the conversation started by saying something like, “I noticed that ...” (see following page for conversation starters) Try to be accepting, even if you don’t agree with what they are saying.

##### **G – GIVE REASSURANCE AND INFORMATION**

After someone has shared their experiences and emotions with you, be ready to provide hope and useful facts.

##### **E – ENCOURAGE APPROPRIATE PROFESSIONAL HELP**

The earlier someone gets help, the better their chances of recovery. So, it’s important to offer to help this person learn more about the options available to them.

##### **E – ENCOURAGE SELF-HELP AND OTHER SUPPORT STRATEGIES**

This includes helping them identify their support network, programs within the community, and creating a personalized emotional and physical self-care plan.

**Follow-up with a school counselor and/or administrator and follow your organization’s procedures for these situations**



# Mental Health

## Conversation Starters and Responses

### Name What You've Noticed...

*"You seem \_\_\_\_\_ (down, distant, different, angry, upset, disappointed...)"*

*"I noticed... (you've been missing class, not turning in assignments...)"*

*"You mentioned that you always feel sick and tired during first period.  
Tell me more about that."*

### Responding: Listen and Show You Care

*"You're dealing with a lot"*

*"I hear that you're feeling \_\_\_\_\_ (sad, anxious, etc.) and it makes it difficult to \_\_\_\_\_ (concentrate, get work done, etc.)"*

*"What can I do to help support you?"*

### Asking if they'd like professional support:

*"It can be helpful to talk with a professional, would that be helpful for you?"*

*"Will you walk with me to the counselor's office?"*

**Follow-up with a school counselor and/or administrator and follow your organization's procedures for these situations**

### Personal Boundaries and Self-Care

- Creating space: Keeping boundaries simple & clear; establish when and where you can follow up with the student; be consistent with them
- Set aside time for yourself to relax, reflect, and recharge
- Seek personal and professional support, as needed

# References

- **3rd Millennium Classrooms - Signs of Vaping** - Page 8
- **Behind the Haze (vape facts)**- page 5
- **CDC - Adolescent mental health data and substance facts** - pages 5, 11
- **Child Mind Institute - Anxiety signs** - page 11
- **Classroom Mental Health from University of Michigan Depression Center** - page 15
- **Getting Candid: Framing the Conversation Around Youth Substance Use Prevention - National Council For Mental Wellbeing** - Page 3, 7
- **Mental Health First Aid from National Council for Mental Wellbeing - Depression and Anxiety signs, ALGEE** - page 14
- **Motivational Interviewing to Enhance Youth Tobacco Cessation by National Behavioral Health Network** - Page 3
- **National Institute for Drug Abuse (Substance Facts)** - page 5
- **Nemours Teens Health (Alcohol Facts)**- page 5
- **Parents Against Vaping e-cigarettes (PAVe)** - Page 4
- **Risk and Protective Factor model (Hawkins, Catalano)** - page 4
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (Substance Facts)** - page 5
- **Substance Use Prevention Communications Toolkit - ADAPT** - page 2
- **Talking with Youth About Substance Use - ADAPT** - pages 2, 3, 6, 9
- **UnHypedVT (vape facts)** - page 5
- **Vermont Department of Health (Cannabis Facts)** - page 5
- **What Educators Can Do to Help Prevent Underage Drinking and Other Drug Use - Guide from SAMHSA** - Pages 6, 7
- **Youth.gov - Risk and Protective Factors** - page 11
- **Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2021)** - pages 4, 5

*Thank  
you!*

**Peoples Academy OVX Students**

**Lamoille North Youth Coalition Students**

**GMTCC Allied Health Students**

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**and everyone who is making a positive impact on the  
lives of youth across our region!**



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